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Cover story



Shah Farid jots down his views while listening to a student's enunciation as she delivers her presentation.

At home with another language

Young Malaysians are being sponsored to master and teach Mandarin, which is fast gaining global importance.

By THO XIN YI

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GETTING up for school in the midst of a Beijing winter is a tough proposition for many. It is not difficult to see why, as the average temperature from December to February is below 0°C.

Winter in the Chinese capital city is characterised by a long period of chilly and dry weather from early November to March, and offers little respite, even during sunny days.

For Ros Mohamad Shah Farid Mat Rashid, it was doubly difficult as he had to remember dozens of new Chinese characters each day, no matter what the weather was outside.

The native of Kelantan was sent there in 2009 to learn Mandarin as a 18-year-old on a Mara scholarship.

Shah Farid, as he prefers to be called, spent five years in the Chinese

capital undergoing the Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language programme at Beijing Foreign Studies University ([lb.bfsu.edu.cn](http://bfsu.edu.cn)) or BFSU.

"We were given 50 words for spelling quiz every day!" he recalled in a recent interview with *The Star*.

Now 25, Shah Farid recalled the days when he would practise writing Chinese characters on the fogged up bathroom mirror as he brushed his teeth.

He was one of the 58 Government-sponsored students (14 by Mara, the rest by Education Ministry) sent to China that year so they could be Mandarin teachers in government schools and institutions, with bonds ranging from five (for Mara) to eight years (Education Ministry).

According to a *Bernama* report last October, there are currently 403 Education Ministry-sponsored stu-

dents at BFSU and the Beijing Language and Culture University, on top of 29 students sponsored by Mara and 25 by Sime Darby. They are mostly non-ethnic Chinese.

Shah Farid landed in Beijing in the late summer month of August 2009, and has been soaking up every moment since he arrived there.

Besides memorising the words from flash cards and relying on a Chinese mobile app based dictionary, he quickly made friends with the local students, and that helped speed up his learning.

"It really helped when we started having Chinese friends. We would text and call our language buddies, asking for help when we needed to order food," said Shah Farid, who is known as Fa Li among his Chinese friends.

Things became better after he completed the foundation year, and was sufficiently equipped with some basic Chinese.

However, this rapid and deep immersion into language and culture eventually made him fall in love with China and all things associated with it.

Without doubt, starting from zero is a huge challenge to non-Chinese native speakers as Mandarin is one of the toughest languages to learn – given that it is a tonal language, among others.

Thankfully, Shah Farid's perseverance allowed him to complete his programme in July 2014, and he returned to Malaysia to obtain a Diploma in Education before commencing his lecturing career at Mara Professional College at Indera Mahkota, Kuantan.

He still remembers teaching his very first class.

"I was so nervous. I wore a well-pressed suit, complete with vest as a confidence booster," said Shah Farid.

He began by telling them stories about China. At the end of the class, a student approached him to ask if the programme he did in Beijing was still running.

"It gave me the motivation to do more and present my lessons in a better way," he said.



Shah Farid (centre) surrounded by his students who find his teaching style unique and engaging.

Shah Farid's trepidation was understandable because his students had to study Mandarin as a compulsory subject for their respective diploma programmes.

He knew he had to develop his own style to win them over and inspire them.

However, he mercifully spared his students from having to memorise 50 words a day like he had to do in China. Instead, they only had to memorise 15 words for spelling tests each week.

Shah Farid eventually taught five classes for 16 hours a week, which he livened up with entertaining Youtube videos.

"I tell my students that Chinese is now an important language as China is rising.

"Many Malaysians love travelling to China and it is not a problem even for Muslims as the country has a huge Muslim population as well.

"So, why not learn Chinese and benefit from the extra knowledge?"

Bridging barriers

The cultural gaps between different racial groups can be narrowed, while misunderstandings can be minimised, if both sides can speak each other's language, he said.

Shah Farid, who now speaks Mandarin with a mainland accent, recently resigned to pursue a Master's in Linguistics at Universiti Malaya.

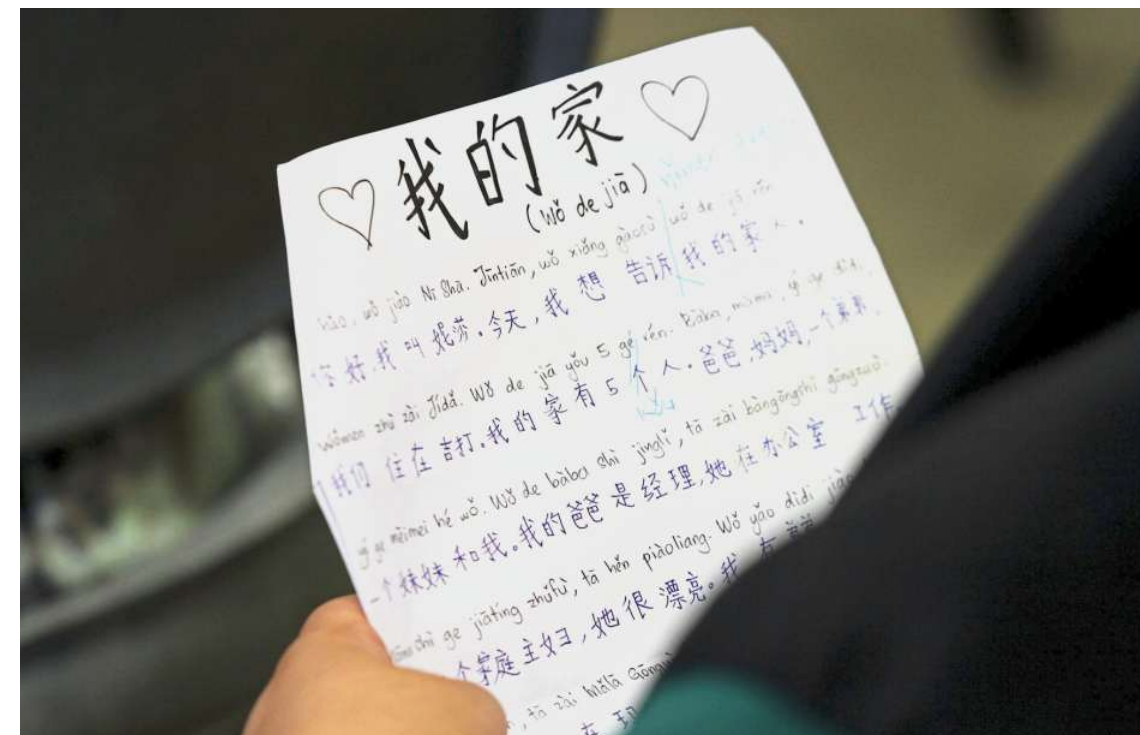
His thesis will most likely explore the challenges faced by Malay students in learning Chinese.

At his last tutorial at Indera Mahkota, his students surprised him with farewell party.

He was moved to tears when the students presented him with a cake.

It was obvious that Shah Farid's easy-going disposition and teaching style had endeared him to his students. They were all sad to see him go.

"I like him so much! He is so sporting, knowledgeable, friendly and open-minded," said student Izzyan Fitri Miswan, 19, who added that she was sufficiently inspired by Shah Farid to



A beginner's essay on her home and family.

the extent she plans to operate a kindergarten that offers Chinese classes.

Meanwhile, Mariam Md Noor, 27, has her father to thank for having the foresight to enrol her in a Chinese primary school.

"My dad was a sailor who travelled around the world. He saw the rise of China and felt it would be an advantage to learn Mandarin," she said.

The second of four siblings attended SJK (C) Chuen Min and later, Hin Hua High School, both in Klang. Her two other sisters also went to Chinese schools while the youngest attended national school.

Her family believes there is a difference between both the school systems, said Mariam.

"Teachers in Chinese schools are stricter and students always have lots of homework.

"They don't have much free time even during the school holidays and that makes them more disciplined," the Pulau Indah native said.

Mariam said she had to work harder at school since the majority of her schoolmates were native Mandarin speakers.

Her father's foresight proved useful when she was accepted into the Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language programme in BFSU through sponsorship from the Education

Ministry.

Mariam, who goes by the Chinese name Ma Lian, was placed in a class with international students in China. Like her, her course mates had the basics in the language.

Her ability to speak Mandarin came in handy, especially when helping her coursemates who were less fluent in the language.

There were instances when she proved to be of great assistance when accompanying fellow students to see the doctor as she could describe the symptoms to the doctor, and then translate the diagnosis for her friends.

During her studies in Beijing from 2008 to 2013, she learnt Chinese from highly demanding instructors.

Other than emphasising pitch-perfect intonation, her teachers introduced literary masterpieces like *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun, to the students.

She recalled one particular incident where a lecturer, upon feeling so disappointed with the students' lackadaisical attitude, came into class one day and wrote *ji had* on the board. When used as a noun, this Arabic word can mean "the act of striving, applying oneself, struggling, or persevering".

"The lecturer said we were not practising the concept of *ji had* by striving to give our best.

"Our lack of enthusiasm, he added, was just like the Chinese idiom *xiao fu ji an*, which is used to describe people who are complacent.

"Such people are pleased with their little accomplishments and are not keen on taking on new challenges," Mariam said.

Her stay in China left her in awe of her Chinese lecturers, whom she described as very humble despite being extremely knowledgeable.

Upon her return from Beijing, she completed her Diploma in Education at the Ipoh Teachers' Training Institute, and is now a Chinese language teacher at SK Puteri Pandan 1 in Kuala Lumpur. Last year, she had 37 students from Years One to Six.

While her biggest satisfaction has been seeing the students pick up the language bit by bit, she is understandably impatient with the overall pace of Mandarin learning here.

Mariam said that it is unfortunate that there is a huge imbalance between the number of Malaysians who understand Malay only, and those who understand Mandarin.

"Languages are like bridges connecting people. We really need them to understand each other. Being able to speak Mandarin is definitely an advantage for me. If there is a chance to learn Tamil, I will be just as keen."